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ABSTRACT

Because poetic writing as a method of discourse and as a tool for learning plays a significant role in many theoretical models of writing but is rarely used in practice, a study was conducted to examine the effects on 70 college students in an introductory psychology class of a mixture of poetic and transactional assignments on the subject of schizophrenia. Students had one major expressive assignment (journals), two drafts (a first poem and a short story), and one final poetic assignment. They also had one draft and one final transactional assignment. A checklist and open ended questionnaire were used to gather student responses. Results indicated that the poem assignments encouraged creativity and helped students understand schizophrenia from the inside, while the transactional assignments helped them organize their thoughts and prepare to communicate them to another audience. (The report also briefly describes the experiences of one of four students selected for in-depth examination.) (JL)

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The Value and Function of Poetic Writing

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Poetic writing as a method of discourse and as a tool for learning plays a significant role in the theoretical models of Britton, Moffett, D'Angelo, and Kinneavy, and yet studies in four English-speaking countries effectively demonstrate that poetic writing is assigned infrequently in the schools, and virtually not at all outside of English classes.[1] From our reading and discussion with colleagues we came to believe the same was true at the college level. Thus we became intrigued with what appeared to be a discrepancy between current theoretical assumptions about writing and the actual practices of teachers in the classroom. We resolved to include some "creative writing" assignments in an introductory psychology class, and (over the course of several terms) to develop instruments and techniques which might enable us to evaluate the importance of such assignments.

Poetic thinking, in James Britton's sense, has always been part of my (Michael Gorman's) introductory psychology course. I assign Mark Vonnegut's The Eden Express, an autobiographical account of a young man's journey into and out of schizophrenia. Vonnegut describes schizophrenia from the inside, reproducing his thoughts and feelings while he's hallucinating, trying to kill himself and struggling to figure out what's happening to him. Once students begin reading it, they find it difficult to put

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down. As one of my students remarked, "It was interesting--I couldn't fall asleep after reading it." My objective is to get students to see schizophrenia from the inside--to understand what it means to be schizophrenic, not just memorize a bunch of facts about schizophrenia. This involves exploring values and taking what Britton calls the "spectator role." For example, I have students evaluate several models of therapy in terms of whether they can be applied to schizophrenia. That evaluation rests on feelings as much as facts--if a student can sense what it feels like to be a schizophrenic, he or she will evaluate the therapies in a more personal way. Mark Vonnegut, the author of the Eden Express, does just that--he talks about how it feels to take Thorazine, to be shut up in a padded room, etc.

But it never occurred to me to use poetic writing to accomplish these goals. I had my students write essays in which they discussed how various therapeutic models could be applied to Mark's case. The essays were good, but I wasn't satisfied. Students were mastering the facts of Mark's case and in some cases seemed to be looking at their values. But I consider values exploration and engaging feelings so important that I wanted to make sure every student was encouraged to do these activities.

So when Art explained Britton's model to me and suggested trying poetic writing, I jumped at the idea. I asked students in a previous class to "Write a poem about how the humanistic-existential perspecitve can be applied to schizophrenia. You may use Mark Vonnegut's case, if you like. Your poem may be serious or humorous, rhymed or unrhymed--anything you like." This

perspective is one of the four they had to prepare for their final papers. Its major proponent is R.D. Laing who holds that "schizophrenia is an sane response to a insane world." He is a poet himself, so I thought this perspective might be particularily easy to adapt to poetry. To see Laing's point, you have to "step outside" our ordinary distinction between sane and insane, real and unreal and see society from the standpoint of a schizophrenic who may reject all of our normal, everyday values.

When Art and I went over the poems, we saw some evidence that students were taking the spectator role. We also saw that at least some of the students found the assignment a refreshing change from the essays, which I still required. So we decided to conduct a more formal, in-depth study of the effects of poetic writing in my Introductory Psychology class. A single poem isn't going to have much effect in a class where exams and essays count for most of the grade. We decided to test the effects of a mixture of poetic and transactional assignments, looking at different stages of the writing process, as described by Britton. We came up with the following list of assignments:

1. Students were first asked to write a poem about schizophrenia before they had read anything about it, to give them a chance to explore their feelings and impressions. They were told it would be an ungraded draft.

--From these poems, four students were selected for in-depth case-studies that Art will describe later in this talk.

2. Then students were assigned a draft essay, worth 4 points (out of a total of 100 for the course), in which they had to

discuss how the bio-medical and learning models could be applied to Mark's case. They were told that this essay would help them with their final papers and that it would not be graded critically. (In fact, most students got full credit).

3. Next, students had to write a draft short story on roughly the same topic as their draft essay. The idea here was to compare transactional and poetic approaches to the same assignment. The story was also worth 4 points and again, most students received all four.

4. Toward the end of the course, students were asked to write a poem about how the humanistic-existential perspective could be applied to Mark's case. I had used this assignment several times before, but never in a class where the students had already done several poetic assignments. This poem was expected to be closer to a final product than the first one and was worth two points. Again, the students knew they wouldn't be graded critically.

5. At the end of the course, the students had to hand-in a formal paper in which they compared the bio-medical and humanistic-existential approaches to Mark's schizophrenia. This paper was worth ten points and students knew it would be graded more critically than their first draft.

6. Students were also asked to keep journals throughout the quarter, making two entries a week.

In summary, then, students had one major expressive assignment (the journals), two drafts (the first poem and the short story) and one final poetic assignment (the second poem). They also had one draft and one final transactional assignment.

We expected to see a cumulative effect from these

assignments: students becoming more daring in their exploration of their feelings/values about Mark's case in the poetic assignments and students gaining better mastery of factual material on the transactional. We also hoped student attitudes toward writing would improve, particularily with respect to how poetic writing can be used to explore values. We developed a number of qualitative and quantitative instruments to assess students' reactions to these assignments and get a sense of what the students were learning from them. Students signed voluntary consent forms to allow us to use their papers and questionnaire responses in our research. We explained the study to them at the end of the quarter, and invited their comments.

We will report results from two instruments today: a checklist and a questionnaire. The checklist items are based on comments from students in previous introductory psychology classes. Students in my current psychology class were asked to check items they thought pertained to a specific assignment, e.g., "It helped me explore my own feelings about sanity and insanity." Students were also given open-ended questionnaires after each assignment that asked them how they felt about the assignment and whether it affected their thinking about schizophrenia.

Questionnaire Results

Michael described the design and instruments we used in this study. I (Margaret Gorman) will say a few words now about what we found from all this.

As we expected, students found the various assignments useful or interesting for different reasons. This variety is reflected in how students responded after each assignment to the items on our checklist. Since our checklist items reflected both positive and negative reactions as well as objective goal-oriented purposes and more playful exploration purposes, we feel students had opportunity to let us know what they felt about each kind of assignment. I will show you here responses to three of the checklist statements:

RESPONSES TO CHECKLIST ITEMS

The writing enabled me to organize what I knew into words that will be useful whenever the topic comes up again--on a paper or an exam, or even in conversation with friends.

44% checked this for draft essay
36% checked this for short story
27% checked this for second poem
74% checked this for final essay

It gave me a chance to think and be semi-creative at the same time.

52% checked this for draft essay
76% checked this for short story
71% checked this for second poem
40% checked this for final essay

I wrote this assignment from Mark's point of view (or the point of view of a schizophrenic): it gave me the opportunity to get inside a schizophrenic's head.

24% checked this for draft essay
23% checked this for short story
57% checked this for second poem
4% checked this for final essay

You can see in the first statement that more of the fifty-five students in the class found the final essay and the draft essay useful for organizing their thoughts for future reference than the short story or the poem. (We refer to the poem as the "second poem" to distinguish it from the poem we assigned early

in the course.

Students believed the short story and the poem allowed them to think and be creative whereas they indicated this less often for the final essay or the draft essay. It is interesting to note, however, that half the students did feel that they could be thoughtful and creative while writing an essay draft, and that this percentage drops to a little over a third of the students for the final essay.

The poem assignment was most effective at getting students to write from a schizophrenic's point of view and to move inside a schizophrenic's head. Over half the students checked this item after writing their poems, whereas less than a quarter checked it after completing the other assignments.

So in summary, it is our feeling that the transactional assignments helped students organize their thoughts and prepare to communicate them to another audience. Supporting this idea, 62% of the students indicated that their draft essay helped them prepare for their final assignment whereas only 29% of the students felt their poem helped them prepare--even though the poem, like the draft essay, was on a topic they had to cover in their final essay! On the other hand, the poem encouraged creativity and helped students understand schizophrenia from the inside. If, as scholars tell us, empathy is an important aspect of moral sensibility, and if decentering is an important part of writing development, such assignments might assist teachers in meeting both. Results from the story are more ambiguous because the story was written after an essay on the same topic; the students' stories were very essay-like in their content.

However, we have learned that ambiguity is integral to research and writing, and we are committed to further exploring the ambiguity whether or not we can explain it.

To help us evaluate the impact of the poem, we wanted to know more about the kinds of experiences these students have had with writing poetry. After they wrote the first poem, we asked them two questions about their experiences writing poetry.

WRITING POETRY

When were you last asked by a teacher to write a poem?

	percent response
never	0
grammar school	2
junior high	10
high school	57
early in college	31
recently	0

When did you last write a poem on your own?

never	37
grammar school	4
junior high	6
high school	20
early in college	0
recently	33

You can see that most of these students last wrote a poem for a class in high school. A third of them did write a poem early in college, usually in freshman composition courses. Contrast this to when students last wrote a poem on their own. Over a third of them never write poems at all, but another third reported that they had written a poem recently. They write, although no teacher has asked them to do so recently. It appears that we see a class with many closet poets in it!

We also looked at the comments students wrote on the open-ended questionnaire we gave them after completing the second poem

assignment.

COMMENTS ABOUT WRITING THE POEM

Perspectives and Understanding

It gave me a new perspective on schizophrenia (to add to the bio-medical case).

I didn't realize until this assignment what Laing really believed.

I feel as though I explored schizophrenia from a new angle, from inside the schizophrenic's head.

I'm finally grasping what schizophrenia might be.

Feelings and Attitudes

By writing a poem, I could express my thoughts very differently than in a paper.

I liked (my poem) enough to feel comfortable reading it to some friends of mine who wanted to know what I wrote.

I enjoy writing the poems best. Not so much pressure and more opportunity to be creative. It seems I can express my true thoughts better in a poem form than in an informative essay.

Their comments, as represented by these examples, tend to support what they indicated on the check-list. Many students enjoyed the assignment because it allowed them to explore and express their feelings about schizophrenia. The poem also increased students' understanding of the disorder and the psychological perspectives toward it. It helped them explore schizophrenia from the inside. Part of the students' increased understanding stems from the fact that this is the first time they wrote about the humanistic-existential perspective, but part, we feel, comes from the fact that we asked them to write a poem about it. They also wrote about the humanistic-existential

perspective in their final essays and this did not help them understand schizophrenia "from the inside" at all.

I would like to emphasize that we were not working with humanities students, and that these positive comments about being creative come from science students. The student who liked his poem and read it to friends is majoring in biology; the student who believes she expresses her thoughts better in a poem is studying chemical engineering. I should mention that this last student does not write prose well, and produced a fairly poor final essay despite her effort on it. However, she wrote an exciting poem and we are glad she could have an opportunity to express herself in another way, one that she cannot use often at the university. Here is her poem:

She came in my office
In yellow from top to bottom

"I dream of macaroni & cheese"
        she said
This was her favorite food
But later
I concluded that
What she was really doing
        was being <u>that</u> food.

Reality
        was school
Bio tests and lab
Steve the TA
        gives anotherquiz.
"Take me home, Kraft"

What an escape!
        Thin, white and hollow
She puts on her yellow
        sweatshirt
Then on goes the cheese
And all is well

Case-Studies (presented by Art Young)

From the more than seventy students enrolled in the class we selected four students to work with us in two capacities: first as fellow researchers examining the writing of fellow students, recording observations and descriptions, meeting bi-weekly to discuss impressions, and brainstorming at points of departure or points of agreement; and second, we asked them to serve as subjects for the purposes of case study research; to humor us with a couple of taped interviews about their writing and classroom experiences in Introductory Psychology, to do additional journal entries on topics related to their writing and their participation in the research project, to save for us all writing (including rough drafts, outlines, notes) done in connection with this class, and to join us in frequent discussions about the role of writing in learning. Our object was (and still is) to build a profile of these four students as writers in a psychology class, albeit unusual writers, ones who were doing the assignments and then collaboratively reflecting on their possible significance. We wanted the case study dimension to our research to reveal individual instances of student experience under this writing across the curriculum model, a model which utilizes all three components of James Britton's theory-- expressive, transactional, and poetic writing-- in the teaching of a social science class. We also wanted whatever students we selected for study to work with us as collaborators on the research-- thus creating a framework for students and teachers alike to be learners in the research process.

The four students were selected with much bias. During the

first week of class each of the students were asked to write a poem about schizophrenia and fill out two additional survey instruments, the Writing Apprehension Test developed by John Daily and Michael Miller at the University of Texas and the Writing Attitude Survey developed by the Humanities Department Research and Evaluation Committee of Michigan Tech. Margaret, Mike, and I met and in one sitting read these materials and identified those students whose poems we liked, and who saw themselves as people who were fairly good at writing and who enjoyed doing it. From this group we selected four students based on their year in school, major, sex and attitudes toward writing. For example, while each of the four said that they enjoyed writing, some thought journal writing was valuable and others that it was a waste of time. I would now like to give you a thumbnail sketch of one of the student writers.

John is twenty-one years old, an electrical engineering major, mustached, reserved in conversation. He enters the class believing that journals are useful tools and that writing should be done in all classes. He believes in outlines, thesis statements, fixed rules for writing, and knowing precisely what is to be said before touching pen to papers. John likes to write, but feels some nervousness about writing and is a little uncertain about his skill. Although he copies his writing over neatly before turning it in, he is essentially a one draft writer.

John wrote his final essay of more than 750 words in three hours, his assigned "draft essay" of 600 words in one and a half

to two hours, and his short story of 700 words in one and a half to two hours. The only exception to this pattern was the writing of the poem. Here John took several drafts and two hours to write about 100 words in twelve lines. He did at least three major rewrites, each with a separate title: "Voices," "Demons," "Daemons." He discovered both the final title and new implications for his poem by looking up the word "Demon" in the dictionary, a strategy he did not use for any of the other assignments. Thus, when writing in poetic form, he exhibited the behavior Britton terms <u>impelled</u> and Linda Waitkus refers to as <u>enticing</u> - an intense enjoyment with language and form.[2]

John's Writing Apprehension Test and Student Attitude Survey showed little pre to post change except for two items. On December 1, John "strongly agreed" that "There are fixed rules that govern all good writing" and "Before beginning to write, I should know precisely what I want to say." On February 17, he "disagreed with qualification" to both statements. In an interview John was asked about this shift and he replied that the shift had occurred because of the creative writing assignments. In both the short story and the poem he had begun to write without a clear sense of direction, plot or substance. John was quick to point out, however, that the shift on the scale occurred only because of creative writing, that in formal essays he still believed in knowing precisely beforehand what needed to be said, saying it according to fixed rules, and saying it in one draft. This is why he checked "disagree <u>with qualification</u>" on the form; it was a considered decision. John felt that both methods of composing produced good writing for him--using precise planning

and an outline for formal essays--using speculative, discovery writing for creative assignments. John's interpretation of his own experience had delineated two separate but equally valuable writing processes that worked for him. John had never been asked to write a poem in his college career, and only once or twice in high school, maybe. He did not write poetry on his own, but he did occasionally write science fiction stories. However, the journal that he kept for the class contained several entries in poetic and story form, entries of his own devising since the teacher expected prose entries, and indeed the great majority of students did expressive prose entries. His two papers were traditional in form and substance; they covered what was necessary in coherent beginning--middle--end form. It is clear John is comfortable with this form and that it works well for him in fulfilling most of the writing tasks he is asked to do in college. Both of John's poems are written from the schizophrenic's point of view; the first full of nervous energy, confusion, alienation, grotesqueness. The second, written ten weeks later, is calmer, intellectualized, sympathetic. Perhaps John's comment in his journal on reading as a researcher the writing of his fellow students may be illuminating here.

> In the first writing assignments some writers were somewhat unsympathetic with the disease schizophrenia. These same writers became more sympathetic in the second writing assignments, presumably after they learned more about the disease. It seems <u>possible</u> that by putting themselves in the position of being a Schizophrenic in the poems and story they shed prejudices concerning the disease... It is my opinion that the poems were valuable in the study of schizophrenia. I do not believe that they were extremely valuable in that they did not require much research into the specific facts of the subject. <u>However</u>, they were valuable in that they

got me more interested in the subject, they provided me with introductory facts, and most importantly, they allowed me to get into a schizophrenic's head. It is my opinion that you learn more about schizophrenia by imagining yourself schizophrenic than by just studying facts... The only analogy I can think of is that of an actor who plays the part of say, General MacArthur. The actor may be so involved in his role that he actually thinks he knows MacArthur personally even though he's never met him. This is a definite increase in the understanding of the subject.

John is one instance of the kind of reflection that can occur when students are asked to write in content classes like psychology in a variety of ways--expressively, transactionally, poetically. John feels he learned more about psychology and more about writing by experiencing this approach. However, as we have heard in John's own words, the learning in creative writing is different from the "learning the facts" writing he usually does. We need to consider the value of this different kind of learning and writing. Our ongoing project is designed to examine our teacher's intuitions that such writing tasks are worthwhile--worthwhile because as teachers we want to teach persons as well as "the facts."

Notes

1. For a discussion of each scholar's theoretical model, see James Britton, et al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan, 1975); James Moffet, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968); Frank D'Angelo, A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1975); James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971). For poetic writing in the schools in England see Britton above; in American schools see Arthur M. Applebee, Writing in the Secondary School (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1981); in Australian schools see Christopher Jeffrey, "Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Writing Process," Research in the Teaching of English 15, (October, 1981): 215-28; in Canadian schools see Merron Chorny, "A Context for Writing," in Freedman and Pringle, eds., Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition (Conway, Ark.: L & S Books, 1980).
2. See her unpublished dissertation, The Effect of Poetic Writing on Transactional Writing: A Case-Study Investigation of the Writing of Three High School Seniors (Rutgers, 1982).